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AMERICAN GIRLS IN EUROPE.

BY MRS. JOHN SHERWOOD.

THE American Girl is a term so varied and indefinite that we might well borrow, as a parallel, a plaintive and witty appeal made in a recent paper on dogs, in which the writer objects to the phrase "The Dog," as if all dogs were alike. He goes on to say that you might as well write a paper on "The Man," instead of considering one species as "Man." He proposes that we write "Dog" and then proceed to mention the highly individual grades of that faithful adherent of the human race.

So, considering the more than eleven thousand virgins who semi-yearly migrate from America to the shores of England and France, we are compelled to observe that there are many varieties. There is no such thing as the American girl. There is the finished, accomplished, well-bred, repressed, and lady-like girl, found everywhere from Maine to the Gulf. There is the unfinished, not at all bred, not repressed, not in the least lady-like girl, also from everywhere. There is the young lady who pronounces "heart" *hort*—to rhyme with snort—with a very vigorous emphasis on the letter "r." (This latter variety is a favorite with the English novelist.) This pronunciation seems to prevail (so say the Eastern papers) west of Chicago. But if you read the Western papers, you will notice a corresponding criticism of the pronunciation which is considered correct at Boston, that "head-centre" of so-called good English.

We must, therefore, when in Europe, look upon the American product with European eyes, trying to avoid geographical prejudice. The local accent in different parts of America is so marked that a New-Yorker can detect a Philadelphian, a Bostonian, a Southerner, or a Westerner (whatever that means) in a moment. His speech bewrayeth him. But in Europe such shadowy definitions are necessarily lost, and we are all grouped in the English

mind as speaking a sort of Basque—a language which nobody ever heard before. Even so good a writer as Dickens makes his American sea-captain talk a jargon which no American ever heard. Nor can we be surprised at the conglomerate photograph of our national speech presented by such men as the author of "Miss Bayle's Romance," who makes a Chicago girl say, "Well, I guess I'm most roasted," and in several other phases inextricably emphasizes the Northern, Southern, and Western slang.

The universal criticism of the American girl in Europe may be crudely described as nearly always taking this formula: "Beautiful, rich, vulgar. Beautiful, rich, strange. Beautiful, rich, fast. Beautiful, rich, loud. Beautiful, rich, rather better style than you usually find them."

I have rarely heard the first descriptive epithet left out; and, indeed, one is astonished to see the remarkable beauties who come out of unheard-of "districts" in America. It seems a new departure of the human race, as in London or Paris, at Nice or Homburg, one runs against a blonde beauty of such surprising lustre, or a brunette so tall, so superb, so flashing, with such hands and feet, that the proverbial duchess who is supposed to have a monopoly of these appendages is nowhere, and to find that this glorious Helen is from Denver, or Kansas City, or still further west. There is no doubt that that mixture of race or atmosphere, or whatever makes beauty, that subtle, but most desirable, alchemy, is abroad in the United States of America. It is also a question which must puzzle those who pretend to write on heredity that these children of men and women who have labored with their hands, men and women who have never known luxury, possess hands which rival those of the Venus di Medici, feet which have a Spanish smallness and high instep, and little shell-like ears which would point to an ancestry as of a thousand ears.

I have never seen two such aristocratic-looking creatures as the daughters of a hard-working couple who had "struck oil" somewhere in the Middle States, who came over, teeming with money and ignorance, to astonish Nice, and set expectant and most impecunious nobles by the ears; and a prouder, better-behaved, more badly-speaking pair of beauties never helped the English novelist or the French playwright to a type. I was much touched to hear the mother asking a lady near her "what she

should do to make her girls more like the foreign girls." "Give them a year at school in England and a year at school in France," was the sensible reply. For the shrewd American mother saw that her beauties were laughed at. She saw that they neither walked, sat down, rose, ate their dinner, talked to gentlemen, nor put on their hats like the shy, proper, repressed girls who had been educated in convents. She got to know that their language was a strange and unmusical sound, and that their own country-women were anxious to disown them. She also saw that they were inclined to copy bad models, not good ones; which is the easily-besetting sin of the odd variety of American girl.

It is to these highly indigenous interesting specimens, which, like the Scuppernong grape, cannot be produced in Europe, that we must confine ourselves for a moment in considering the American girl in Europe. We must strike out that large class who are so like the rest of the world that they are supposed to be English. That has ceased to be a type, nor is it to foreign eyes nearly so interesting. A mother and daughter of this class, who had passed many years in Europe, once astonished a group of people at Pau by rising and looking flushed, as America was being abused. "You must not speak against my country," said the mother. "What! Are you Americans? Why, we supposed always that you were English. You do not talk through your noses, and you do no American things." Such was the apology. Now, the term "American things" is almost as indefinite as *Roba di Roma*, but it is a part of English speech to-day, and covers, like charity, a multitude of sins.

I once heard at a Queen's ball, when the Prince of Wales led out an American beauty for the quadrille, a free expression of the English mind on this subject. As I kept my mouth shut, I was not detected as an American; so I had the pleasure of hearing the following criticism:

"I don't think the heir to the throne ought to encourage these Americans as he does. I think they are so bold and forward, and they do—such American things."

"Yes, I am tired of it all; tired of the very word American. I think we have been far too good-natured to them," was the response.

I took occasion, a few days after, to ask one of the most agreeable literary men in London—a famous host, by the way—

what were the American things which were so unpleasant to the English mind.

“ Well, I will tell you,” said he. “ In the first place, the American pronunciation is, even amongst your cultivated people, most unmusical and unpleasant to us. I dare say ours is to you. Then, if you will forgive me, we observe in your handsome young women an entire absence of that delicate reserve, that fragrance of propriety, which is our idea of good breeding. I do not say that there are not charming exceptions. And then, again, we do not like your air of success, your air of appropriating everything.”

Perhaps they do not altogether like the fact of success. For there must be added to the measure, “ Beautiful, rich, vulgar. Beautiful, rich, strange. Beautiful, rich, fast,” etc., also “ Beautiful, rich, and very clever.” The amount of talent which is shown by these American girls is quite as extraordinary as their beauty. We need not hint at the supreme sway which certain American women have established in several foreign cities—the adaptability, the clearness of intelligence, that extraordinary thing known as a “ talent for society”—to realize that the American girl has a great deal in that pretty little head of hers.

Doubtless her very free-and-easy training, the consciousness which has been hers, from the moment she could walk and talk, that she can aspire to any position, has given her the boldness to clasp the sceptre of social sovereignty. She is a living example of the truth of Goethe’s lines :

“ What you can do or dream you can, begin it !
Boldness hath genius, power, and magic in it.”

However, all this success does not follow every American girl. It would not be necessary to write this paper if it did. For so dear is success to the human aspirant that it would be clutched even at the expense of much that is more valuable. And by success I mean, for the moment, merely the truest and poorest and most worldly definition of the word. Rank, title, position in society are very dear to the American girl. No wonder, as she comes, like young Lochinvar, out of the West (and the West means, in Europe, everything from New York to San Francisco), she is dazzled by these glittering stars. She goes to court, perhaps, and sees two of her young countrywomen standing by the Queen’s chair, ladies-in-waiting with proud titles. She finds that a title,

however encumbered, insures its owner that kind of respectful recognition from servants, trades-people, inn-keepers, up to the highest grade of society, which is very dear to women, and especially to American women, who, unless they possess some very remarkable magnetism, get very little marked attention in their own country. Would a princess driving up to Macy's move that obdurate mass a single inch? And yet what crowd at the Louvre or the Bon Marché would not fall into respectful aisles as a great lady, preceded by her servant, makes her way? And in London what a magic wand is a carriage, and consequence! It is an entering wedge everywhere. To speak of the toadies, the flatterers, the *apanage* of a title would be to enter on the discussion of a threadbare theme.

To the philosopher, to the republican, to the shade of Thomas Jefferson, all this is unworthy, unpatriotic, and un-American. But how roseate it all is to the young American girl, already intoxicated with the homage to her rare beauty which every eye has rendered her since she left the ship! It is no wonder that many poor moths singe their wings at this blazing and most alluring candle.

Not that all marriages of American women to titled foreigners are unhappy. Far from it: there are many brilliant exceptions. A man reared on the continent with the European idea that he must marry money has a profound sense of the duty he owes the woman who brings him a handsome *dot*. Indeed, in Europe the position of the wife is made infinitely stronger by the fact that she is a financial partner in the firm. She has much more to say about the conduct of the house, the education of the children, and her own pleasure than have American wives, as a rule; certainly very much more than English wives. In England the good old idea still obtains, that the man is master of the house, that the woman is his inferior; and perhaps the legal permission to use a stick no bigger than his thumb is more than a fiction. At any rate, there is an air of authority about an English husband which is slightly unpleasant to an American looker-on. It is never seen in a French or an Italian husband: however much the two latter may deceive, forsake, or rob their wives, they never bully them.

But we are jumping from present to future with indecorous haste. We are marrying an American girl before considering

her sufficiently. One is reminded of the appeal to St. Catherine : "A husband, St. Catherine ! A good one, St. Catherine ! And soon, St. Catherine !" This is not unnatural, this strain of thought, in the knowledge, which one must gain in observing the American girl in Europe, of the fact that she is so immediately wooed. Let it be whispered about that a girl is an heiress, and the haste with which she is pursued is almost incredible. Mothers, aunts, and cousins come with almost an air of authority to the mother or chaperon to announce the claims of Prince John, Baron Frederic, or Count Sobieski. It is revolting and insulting in some instances ; in others it is simply the European way of doing things.

Is it a wonder, then, that the American girls are spoiled ? Is it a wonder that many of them begin to think themselves goddesses ? Is it in human nature, to separate ourselves from our accidents, to say at eighteen, with the coolness which we should feel at eight-and-forty : "This man does not want me ; he wants my money : what am I, individually, Julia Brown, from Mephistopheles, Missouri, that the Countess Piff Paff should dog my footsteps, send me invitations, make of me a great lady, and propose for my husband her very pop-eyed and disagreeable son ? Is it because I am the modern Venus, the modern Atalanta ?"

Vanity says "Yes" at eighteen : at eight-and-forty it tells another tale, by the damaged lantern of experience.

But Julia Brown's manners are injured by this adulation.

I once asked a European lover, as he sat holding Julia's hand in his, what were his first impressions of her.

"I saw her at a *café* in Paris, and I thought her the hardest-looking woman I ever saw," said he.

"Well, when did you alter your opinion ?" I asked.

"When I got to know her, I saw that the *hardness* was all affected," was the reply.

He has been for some years a good and happy husband to a very nice wife, whose manners have essentially improved ; but what a text for a sermon ?

Julia was one of those who copied bad models. At the *cafés* she saw certain ladies who sat in a very free-and-easy fashion, one knee over the other, drinking, laughing, perhaps smoking ; and she observed that these ladies were very popular with gentlemen : she accordingly made herself as like them as she could, poor, innocent American flower !

We are painting the Scuppernong variety now, the innocent and the ignorant: we shall come to the more hybrid growths later.

It is impossible to put any reverence into these virgin souls. They love Papperr and Mammerr, as they call their progenitors, fondly, but with very little reverential awe. Papperr and Mammerr, on their side, have never called for or expected reverence. They love the girls and wish to buy them everything from Worth dresses up to the Pyramids; but they do not have everything themselves. How can they advise the girls on a thousand social questions?—they often appeal to the daughters. Therefore the girls very naturally, when told that they are wrong, resent the advice as an insult. Thus the very first door toward improvement is shut. No one is so haughtily averse to being told that she is in the wrong as “the” or “an” American girl who is in utmost need of such an unvarnished truth.

This lack of reverence applies to rank. Much as she is dazzled by title, she really feels no sort of reverence for it. Perhaps that is one reason why she is so amusing to princes, to those jaded ears which are tired of flattery, those fatigued victims of pomp and etiquette. This strange, wild gazelle of the forest, with her beautiful, soft, fearless eyes, who regards the prince as a man, who will eat out of his hand and bite it afterwards, perhaps, is very entertaining; but some day, when he has enough of the bitten finger, he sends her away with a cold reproof, which she does not understand; and she cannot imagine why she is thus condemned, nor can she understand those cold looks of the surrounding courtiers. Indifferent as such a young lady may be to advice, she is far from indifferent to neglect, censure, or criticism. Indeed, no people are so excessively sensitive, so thin-skinned, as just such American girls. The more reason, one would think, why they should mend their manners.

Henry James's witty sketch of Daisy Miller, while it offended some few Americans who did not understand it, has helped innumerable other Americans, who learned through his delicate satire more than they would through a volume of well-intentioned maxims. So there are few, if any, sinners who commit the gross error of too great familiarity with a courier, or who walk to the Coliseum by moonlight attended only by a gentleman. The sins which American girls commit, in European eyes, are the sins

against public manners, like loud laughing and talking in hotel parlors, in the *salle à manger* of a watering-place, in the Casino at Monte Carlo, in their attitude and manner at a *café* in Paris, and so on.

In the matter of dress, an American girl rises to the situation at once. She is very rarely, if ever, badly dressed. Given such an amount of prettiness as she has, such quickness of eye, and so long a purse, Paris dresses her *à ravir*, and she wears her clothes like a queen, or as queens but seldom do. It is astonishing, when one sees such taste in one direction, that one can see such limitations of taste in the matter of manners; but it is quite evident that some young American girls think, if the outside of the cup and platter is clean, it is no matter about the inside. They neglect their speech, which is a matter of vital importance. For wherever we live, whether in Yorkshire or Rome, Peoria or Paris, there are such things as a cultivated and agreeable voice, a correct pronunciation, and a pretty accent. No one is so dependent upon this charm as a woman. It has made many a plain woman attractive—this gift of speech. And the Venus of Milo would become a fright, if she could open that glorious mouth of hers, and if from it should issue an uncultivated voice, saying “*hort*” for “heart,” “mormor” for “mamma,” or, defiling her classic features for the moment, she should give an unmusical cackle and launch into slang. It will not help the American girl to say “she don’t care.” She does care. There is a native-born American aristocracy, to which all should aspire to belong. The original and beautiful American women have a vivacity and wit which the older civilizations have lost. She should never lose her originality. But she should study to be low-voiced, sweet-voiced, calm, quiet, and thorough-bred.

“We, ignorant of ourselves,
Begin often our own harms, which the wise powers
Deny us for our good.”

This would be a pretty posy for many an American girl’s ring. She rejects nothing of that somewhat promiscuous emblazonment which accompanies celebrity. She does not always remember that she must keep her “presence new and fresh, like robe pontifical.” She does not think, in her careless gayety, what silhouette she is casting on the map of Europe.

One of Nast’s immortal cartoons in the days of the war was of a happy negro dancing in the sun; but on the wall hung the

map of the United States, torn in fratricidal war by that same negro. What an awful monster the shadow was that he cast ! So the shadow of an innocent and beautiful girl may be, by her own inadvertence, something very unlike the original.

Of those hybrid growths, those American girls who are intentionally shocking Europe, we have very little to say, except that they are doing it inartistically. The women of other countries who mistake notoriety for fame are still in good taste. The American who attempts to outrage the *convenances* in a foreign city only gets herself laughed at. It is a losing game.

When the Duke of York spoke kindly to Monk Lewis, the latter was so affected that he shed tears. "Don't weep, Lewis," said Hook, who stood by ; "he didn't mean it."

It is of no consequence, as Toots would say, whether we "mean it" or not on the continent of Europe : we are judged by our external action. "American things," according to European ideas, are love of show, love of publicity, disdain of privacy, a great ignoring of the proprieties of time and place, excessive extravagance in dress, in equipage. We are supposed to throw our money broadcast. As a nation we are supposed to effuse too much. There is no wonder at all that American girls are fascinated by the enamel of foreign manners. As one of them said, perhaps thinking aloud, "If I am to be married for my money by some impecunious foreigner, he will not *say* money half as often as an Anglo-Saxon would. He will at least pretend to love me ; he will make me very satisfied with myself ; he will make me comfortable. I shall buy respect and graceful attendance. He will not *agacer* my nerves as an American would do. Foreigners avoid all topics which are not complimentary and pleasant." Perhaps men have more time to study women in Europe. There is one fact which the American girl can be sure of : she is at present the most talked-of creature in the world. Never before did the women of one nation so successfully invade all nations, and, reversing the Sabine legend, carry off the most able-bodied warriors. The march over England and the Continent by the American girl is a triumphant one. It is a great story of conquest. These lovely Amazons do not stop for ocean, river, or geographical boundary. It is only fit that the records of an army so triumphant, a host so universally well received, should be, like those of Wellington in Spain, universally respected.

It is seldom, however, that the army (to pursue our simile) fails to live off the devastated land which is conquered. But the American girl scorns to do this. Wherever she goes, she scatters gold about her; she not only brings her own commissariat, but she feeds the enemy. What bags of money she has brought with her to pay her captors, after having given them herself! It is a generous warfare.

And what does she get in return? Rank, castles, a new domain, full of the romantic associations of antiquity, art, and literature. She, the morning-glory, shall be trained over ancestral oaks. She shall be on the sunny side of things. The earth returns her smile in flowers; her sun-dial bears this legend:

"I mark no hours but sunny ones,"

—that is, if she gets a good husband. If she gets a bad one, trust her to hold her own. Do not fear for her the fate of Pia di Tolomei. She will not be buried alive in any malarial country-house. Unless she marry a Henri de Tourville, and is pushed over a Swiss precipice, which seems unlikely, she will be quite able to fight her own battle. One cannot insure the happiness of any girl in any marriage; but one can be quite sure that the intelligence, the spirit, and—shall we utter a word liable to misinterpretation?—the temper of the American girl will be a match for any husband, no matter of what nationality. We use the word temper as it is applied to steel—not *a* temper, *the* temper, *her* temper. If we did, we should say that perfect bodies indicate good health, good appetite, an excellent digestion; hence the modern American girl, as seen in Europe, should have a perfect temper. Where are the once universally-recognized pallid, thin, dyspeptic Americans? Not in Europe. That type has passed away. One meets occasionally, it is true, a hectic and imaginative poetess, bitterly Browningite and full of soul, who has run the gamut of the emotions. She may be shut up in an ugly frame, but she is full of talent. What possible hope for this imprisoned spirit, but that some person of gentle manners shall treat her as Beauty did the Beast, and take her on trust? Not as to her fortune; that is never taken on trust in Europe. Business is business with the European who marries an American; but, trusting that the underlying vein of sentiment is no drawback, the lord, or count, or marquis forgives for once the lack of beauty, and marries her—with a dowry.

The shadow which the American girl is just now casting on the map of Europe is, therefore, generally speaking, a robust one. If she chooses, it can be most attractive, and in a thousand cases it is. No women are more courted, admired, and praised. If they choose to make it boucning and loud, that is a fault easily corrected. Remembering, as we must, that we are a “new departure”—hence eligible to criticism ; very adaptive—hence liable to be moulded on the wrong model ; coming from a country where we are always first, not liking to be last, running against cobweb lines of etiquette which, like persons who come from a glare of light into a comparatively dark room, we do not see, what wonder if we make some mistakes ? Only, never too proud to learn or too spread-eagle in our patriotism to believe that we only are right—such should be the American girl.

M. E. W. SHERWOOD.